# unseminary

## NATIONAL CHURCH LEADER SURVEY ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS

## IN-PERSON, REMOTE, OR HYBRID WORK ARRANGEMENTS

BY RICH BIRCH

Is your team moving back to an "in-person" office experience?

Do you know how your team members feel about working at home once life looks a little more normal?

What does the future of church leadership work arrangements look like?

We must understand the impact that COVID-19 has had on our church leadership environment and consider those various dynamics that have been born out of the pandemic.

How work "gets done" has evolved over the last 20–30 years as information and collaboration technology have gained traction and changed our communities. **Many of those changes that we were seeing pre-pandemic have simply accelerated over this last year.**

I can remember those long-gone days in 2018 and 2019 where having a dedicated Zoom account was a special thing. But now even my mom knows how to use Zoom and understands that there's a 40-minute limit for non-paid accounts! **What a difference all of this has made on the way work gets done within the local church!** What changes have we seen in people's preferences regarding getting church work done either in person or remotely?

In the broader marketplace, there seem to be two factions that are digging in around the office environment of the future. Ironically, if you look at companies that are involved in information technology, it seems like they hold divergent and passionate views on both ends of the spectrum.

On the in-person side of the conversation, Google, Apple, and Amazon have recently confirmed that they will return to in-person offices as their default approach. Part of this could be because of the hundreds of millions, or even billions, of dollars that they've spent on offices around the world. But they've also done all kinds of studies that show there is something about being *in the room where it happens*. **They believe that face-to-face drives collaboration.** All three of these companies have made incredible fortunes by helping people work remotely, but it should be noted that they are moving their own workforces into offices post-pandemic.

There are also strong voices advocating for the other side of the conversation. Twitter, Slack, and Dropbox have all made bold steps towards being "remote-first" organizations. Some of these organizations have told their senior management they're not required to come back to their offices, while others have made moves to get rid of office space or enhance their remote working abilities.

Take a look at the headlines in any major publication and you'll see that people are grappling with the complex issues around what work will "look like" post the pandemic. For instance, here are just a few articles that have cropped up in recent days:

- Bloomberg: The Big Question: Is Remote Work Here to Stay?
- CNBC: Workers could face new burnout symptoms when returning to the office—here's how employers can help
- The Atlantic: Winners and Losers of the Work-From-Home Revolution
- USATODAY: What Apple and Google executives missed in telling workers to go back to the office
- The Economist: Remote workers work longer, not more efficiently
- New York Times: A Little More Remote Work Could Change Rush Hour a Lot
- NPR: 'Why Do We Have To Go Back To The Office?': Employees Are Divided About Returning

The same conversation is taking place in churches across the country, as our culture shifts to whatever the *next normal* is going to look like. **We're all trying to identify what we need to do to create either in-person or remote work arrangements as we look to the future.**

In light of this, unSeminary surveyed church leaders from across the country to understand their attitudes, preferences, and experiences regarding working remotely since the start of the pandemic and how it has influenced their thinking going forward.

## OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH LEADERS

Between May 24th and June 4th, 2021, we surveyed nearly 350 leaders from churches ranging from less than 100 members to over 10,000 members. Our goal was to get a clearer picture of what church leaders are thinking when it comes to structuring their work going forward.

We compared their answers to GitLab's 2021 Remote Work Report, which is the leading report on working remotely released by one of the largest all-remote organizations in the world. **We did this because we wanted to compare the attitudes and behaviors of local church teams and their marketplace counterparts.**

We know that the work of the local church is not the same as working in the marketplace. **However, there is much to learn from our contemporaries about emerging attitudes and behaviors in the broader marketplace and it is wise that we compare them to how we work within the local church.** We also believe that we must

be able to lead in an environment that understands what's happening in the marketplace. Oftentimes as church leaders, we're out of step with trends in the broader culture because we structure our work differently. This study attempts to understand the similarities and differences between local church leaders and marketplace leaders.

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON REMOTE WORK WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH

On and off, I've been working remotely for the better part of 20 years. I can remember in the late 90s, spending a tremendous amount of time working from home: emailing, building websites, doing communication plans, and trying to collaborate back and forth across email. The volume of remote work that I do has grown over the last two decades. Some of my work "on the road" with churches across the country has necessitated me being able to do much of my work from a coffee shop or a hotel room. At the same time as working remotely, I also stay connected with various churches and team members scattered across the US, and all over the world. **In many ways, I was living in a remote-first world long before the pandemic hit. And through experience, I've managed to keep strong tabs on what's going on in specific locations.** It is possible to make a huge impact while working remotely.

There are vast differences between how my work life is structured and how my parents' generation structured theirs.

I'm firmly Gen X. I was born in 1974, the lowest birth rate year of the 20th century, and while I was growing up my dad was upwardly mobile in his career. As a kid, I clearly remember times where we'd have only one car and so we'd drive to my dad's workplace to pick him up and take him home from time to time. I remember that some days we'd wait and wait for him to finish his day at the office. **The work he did, although it was primarily knowledge-based, needed to be done in proximity to other people and to the organization that he was leading.**

*The upside for his generation was that work was something you physically went to.* I have no recollection of my dad doing anything that looked like work from the office whilst he was at home. His work stayed at the office. (In fact, some of my fondest memories of that time would be the rare occasion of going into "work" with him on the weekend if he needed to check on something.)

*However, the downside was that work was something that he went to.* My dad coached my hockey team in my early years, and he attended a lot of other school events. However, many of my contemporaries did not have their parents watching in the audience because they needed to be at their offices, working.

The distinct line between the office and the home had its upsides and downsides. **As we chart the path forward, I think it's important for us to think carefully about how we structure the home lives of our team members. We want to maximize their effectiveness as well as ensure their long-term health as they serve within our churches.**

## SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

This blog post contains some of the highlights of the learnings from unSeminary's study; however, I would encourage you to pick up the full study that is much larger than what we can cover here. It dives into all the facets we studied and provides a lot of action points for us to think about as we move forward. But for an even shorter summary, here are three key findings from our national church leader study that focused on attitudes towards work as we move beyond the pandemic:

- ### CHURCH LEADERS ARE OPEN TO MORE REMOTE WORK.

  As the study shows, church leaders are open to more remote work in the future. It doesn't appear that there is widespread hostility towards this. However, the volume of remote church work is far less than in the marketplace. It seems that we were positively predisposed to working remotely but need some guidance to take steps towards it.

- ### THE NATURE OF OUR WORK IS STILL SEEN AS IN-PERSON.

  So much of what we do as church leaders is seen as in-person, whether that's recruiting and training leaders, hosting services, or various other actions that take place within the local church. Many church leaders see these as things that can only happen in an in-person environment. This is somewhat ironic, considering we're coming out of the backend of a pandemic where for long periods many of us were forced to figure out how to do in-person things, remotely! There is an opportunity here for us to take some of these learnings and apply them to our future. We can craft a new hybrid work and leadership experience for our teams. There is strong evidence that working remotely is better for our people and our ministry outcomes. We need to explore what that looks like in the coming months and years.

- ### CHURCH STAFF ARE NOT PREPARED TO WORK REMOTELY.

  Church leaders are far less equipped to work remotely than their marketplace counterparts. One of the things that you'll see through this study is that there's a huge gap between how marketplace leaders and church leaders see their readiness and attitudes towards working remotely. This study confirmed one of my suspicions that as executive leaders within the local church, we need to work hard to help our people be prepared for a more remote future. We need to stop focusing on improving our systems that served the church of yesterday and focus on readying our leaders for the future. This study outlines some examples of the kinds of work we could do on this front to help our people be better prepared.

## 5 KEY LEARNINGS FROM A NATIONAL CHURCH STUDY ON THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS IN-PERSON AND REMOTE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

There are five significant findings that this study presents. Local churches should consider these findings as they pivot off the backend of COVID-19 and reform their life-work balance situations for their team members. Each one of these findings compares the experiences of local church leaders to marketplace leaders and contains some potentially effective "next steps" for church leaders.

# IN-PERSON, REMOTE, AND HYBRID: ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES TO HOW WE WORK TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

*One of the striking similarities between marketplace and church leaders is that 4 in 10 say that their organization's policy towards work is hybrid.*

Both church leaders and marketplace leaders indicate that their current organization's approach is to provide an experience where both in-person and remote work experiences are available. It's worth noting that both surveys took place at the tail end of the pandemic. At this time, many jurisdictions across the country were still restricted in what office work could look like, or COVID hesitancy was still expressing itself. There were still people, even as vaccination rates rose, who were nervous to enter face-to-face environments.

The findings show a few differences between church leaders and marketplace leaders when it comes to attitudes and approaches to structuring their work lives. *Marketplace employees are six times more likely to have a remote-only approach to their workplace.* 32% of marketplace leaders indicated that they have a remote-only workplace approach whereas only 5% of church leaders are currently experiencing this. This is not a particularly surprising find. As noted earlier, so much of what we do in the local church is seen as in-person by nature.

**We should be thinking about this critically because this difference may mean that church leaders won't be able to communicate effectively to their people and the broader culture as they may not know what "work" in the marketplace looks like anymore.** It is amazing to think that almost one in three marketplace leaders surveyed indicated that their work environment has become remote-only. This surely represents a shift in attitude, particularly from 10 years ago. This trend towards remote-only continues to increase within the marketplace and needs to be something that church leaders think about when helping people work through what it means to be a Christ-follower in the workplace.

Amongst church leaders, there is a level of ambivalence shown around whether they're supposed to be in-person or remote. *Church leaders are two and a half times more likely to say that remote work is either "allowed or tolerated but is not the norm or default".* Only 14% of marketplace leaders would describe their work environment like this, while 40% of church leaders say that this is the case. This could also represent a level of ambivalence in local churches around how they structure their work-life balance. The knowledge-based work that church leaders do means they could have flexible approaches to work arrangements that would be suited to remote configurations. **While flexibility is a good thing, fuzziness is not okay.** Clarity needs to be king when we're structuring people's work arrangements. As we come out of COVID-19, one thing we need to be clear on is what we expect from our teams. Pushing beyond the fact that remote work is allowed or tolerated, we need to be clear with people on exactly what that arrangement will look like going forward.

# CHURCH LEADERS ARE NOT PREPARED, EQUIPPED, OR RELEASED TO WORK REMOTELY.

This area represented the largest disparity between the marketplace and church leadership. Part of the survey tried to understand people's ability to be both prepared and trained to work remotely. It also asked them to reflect on their organization's willingness to release them to do that healthily. People were asked to select which of the following statements applied to their attitude towards working remotely.

- I am satisfied with the tools and processes that enable remote team communication.
- My leadership team understands what it takes to operate a team remotely.
- I am able to accomplish all of my tasks remotely.
- My leadership team gives me agency and authority while working remotely.
- Remote work is the future of work.
- I recommend working remotely to a friend.

All these areas attempt to get a holistic picture of people's attitudes towards working remotely. **It gives us a sense of how prepared and aligned team members are around the area of working remotely.**

On average, marketplace leaders rated these statements collectively as 81% true. Astonishingly, 8 out of 10 marketplace leaders indicated that each one of the statements is true for their workplace when only 1 in 3 of these same leaders experience a fully remote work environment. Noticeably, 8 out of 10 marketplace leaders have the framework in place to step towards working remotely in the coming years. However, on average, only 36% of church leaders rated these statements as true. *Church leaders were less than half as likely to express that they're favorably prepared or released to work remotely.* Therefore, there is a significant difference between marketplace leaders and church leaders when it comes to feeling prepared to work remotely.

Executive leaders within the local church need to focus on equipping their teams to work remotely if they are looking to fuel this aspect of their work culture. This will require three aspects:

- **TRAINING**
  Provide consistent training for people focused on how to work remotely. This should not be generalized, but specific to the type of work that each team member needs to do. This will encourage your team to step forward in their position with confidence.

- **TOOLS**
  Investing in collaboration tools and a consistent approach to connecting when not in the office is important for churches to do if they're eager to craft an effective remote work environment.

- **EMPOWERMENT**

  Ultimately, having a more remote workforce drives the organization to be more trusting of its team members rather than depending on a centralized command and control structure. Remote workforce managers need to trust their people to do their work to move the ministry forward. This study could point to the fact that too many church leaders are holding onto old, centralized control structures rather than a decentralized vision and outcome-result approach. We've seen widespread adoption of these newer approaches in the marketplace.

## THE MAJORITY OF CHURCH LEADERS DON'T ANTICIPATE THEY WILL WORK REMOTELY POST-PANDEMIC.

*Only 19% of church leaders surveyed believe that they will primarily work remotely after the pandemic has receded. This is compared to 74% of those in the marketplace sample.*

I wish I had the pre-pandemic numbers on this to compare with our results; however, I will work with our findings to illustrate my point. 19% means that nearly 1 in 5 church leaders believe that they will work remotely after the pandemic. This is a sizeable portion of the local church workforce. There are about 600,000 ministry leaders in America. So, our findings indicate that 120,000 of these leaders hold this opinion. That's a lot of folks sitting in coffee shops and the spare bedroom in their house!

There have been some "remote work evangelists" who, in this season, have been calling for this huge shift post-pandemic. They've been jumping up and down, talking about how no one should go back to the church office, and that all of us will end up working remotely as we did during the height of the pandemic. Most church leaders are not accepting this view at present.

*However, nearly 1 in every 2 church leaders believes that they will work remotely sometimes.* From my perspective, this shows that there's an openness to work remotely. Church leaders are noting the trajectory of doing more work outside of the office as they look to the future. However, they haven't made the jump to say it's all going to be done remotely.

Although this is the case, there are still many leaders feeling unprepared and not trained or released to make the jump to work remotely as their default approach.

This represents an opportunity for the leadership of local churches to open dialogues with their teams about their preferred future work arrangements. This part of the study indicates that at least half of the people serving on your team are thinking that they will occasionally work out of office. Keep this in mind when you engage with your team members and plan a way forward.

How does your team want to structure their work going forward? How can you support that? **What could it look like to help your team achieve their work-life balance through a combination of remote and in-person work arrangements?** How do we create an environment where people can easily shift between one and the other?

# WORKDAY "RITUALS" LOOK VERY SIMILAR FOR MARKETPLACE LEADERS AND CHURCH LEADERS.

One of the questions that we explored in our survey is, where does your typical workday begin? What do church leaders or marketplace leaders do when their typical workday starts? There was a striking similarity between these two groups. *53% of marketplace leaders say that they begin their workday by checking their emails, and 51% of church leaders said the same thing.* **Email is how many leaders start the day.** This is an important thing to notice because email continues to be the monster of all collaboration tools. It is the preferred way for people to begin their day, and it's still a primary connection tool.

*While there are a lot of other communication and collaboration tools that have attempted to unseat email, it would appear, for good or bad, that email continues to have a stronghold on leaders across the country.* This is an important thing to note because we need to train our people on how best to manage their email. Just think about the fact that every morning, 50% of your leaders sit down and check their email before they do anything else. We want it to be a well-used tool and something that drives ministry collaboration going forward rather than slowing it down.

Here is an interesting thought: **If you're looking to reach leaders in your church, then sending an email that hits their inbox first thing in the morning is a great way to get their attention.** A way to aid this would be to survey the people in your church and find out what the beginning of their workday looks like. What time do they start working? You could do this under the guise of trying to understand their work-life balance, and that this information would help you communicate with teams.

There were some other interesting findings when we looked at how people structured their workdays. For example, 1 in 3 church leaders indicated that their workday startup routine varies, whereas only 1 in 7 of marketplace leaders said that their workday varies. Therefore, *there is less randomness with marketplace leaders in how they begin their days.*

This could represent the fact that the work we do in the local church has more variety, or it could represent that there's less discipline in how church leaders structure their work lives.

Although only two-thirds of surveyed people were lead pastors or executive pastors, a small finding is that *only 1.75% start their day looking at numbers or the numerical performance of the organization. For marketplace leaders, the result was only 5%,* but it is markedly larger than what's happening in the local church. I know that these are small numbers, but it is worth noting that far fewer church leaders start their day looking at the numbers that are driving their organization. They could look at things like giving, attendance, newcomer numbers, etc. This could be an area of further inquiry as we go forward. A lot of churches track numbers, but **how are we using those numbers to drive the performance of our teams and our organizations?**

## CHURCH LEADERS ARE 50% MORE DISTRACTED THAN MARKETPLACE LEADERS

The survey also asked what the greatest pain is in a person's workday. Both groups said that distractions are the greatest pain associated with their daily function as a leader. However, church leaders indicated this pain to be 50% higher than marketplace leaders. *Only 25% of marketplace leaders indicated that distractions were a pain point, as opposed to 37% of church leaders.*

Just stop for a minute and think about this. **Distraction indicates that people are doing work that they see as not core to the mission.** The only way that you would identify something as a distraction is because you self-identify that it is sideways energy.

You only consider something a distraction when you know that it's taking you away from focusing on what you're responsible for doing. Just over one in three church leaders say that their daily distractions are their greatest source of pain in leading their local church.

**Your church team members are finding distractions to be a consistent pain point.** Our role as leaders is to help give our team focus and ensure that our people are plugged in with the essential work that's pushing the mission forward. Each one of our team members is given spiritual gifts that we know empowers them to uniquely contribute to their team. When they're not operating in their area of gifting, they're not living out their God-given purpose in life.

We believe that each of our team members should be focused primarily on doing only what they can do. We hire people to solve problems and move the mission forward in a specific way. How can we help them stay on task? **What do we need to do to help reduce their distraction?** This finding could make landmark differences in the life of your church if you focus on trying to solve it with your team members.

## 3 NEXT STEPS CHURCH EXECUTIVE LEADERS CAN TAKE OUT OF THIS STUDY

Our goal was not only to listen and understand where church leaders are at. We also wanted to provide you with some potential next steps for your team. We suggest you pull your leadership team together and look at the study and reflect on how you can push your team forward as you craft a post-pandemic office and work environment.

Here are three potential things you could look at:

- **CLARITY**

   Define what the *next normal* will be. It seems like church leaders across the country are open to more remote work environments, but let's move beyond just tolerating either in-person or remote and define it for our people. Getting clear as we come out of COVID will enable our team to make wise decisions around their work-life balance. Fuzziness in this season around "how" work is done should be rejected. Let's be pushing hard to ensure our people gain deeper levels of clarity on how work is done in the church.

- **TRAINING**

  Don't assume that your people know how to do the work that you're asking them to do. Oftentimes, we define what we are hoping people will achieve in their areas, but we do not spend enough time training them to reach these goals and work in a hybrid environment. Don't just launch a new tech tool. Rather, push towards training that can help them understand how to get the most out of the tech tool and other systems. Teach your people what good collaboration looks like and reward them for engaging with each other (whether it's in-person or online). Like any good relationship, communication is something that needs to be worked on because it doesn't just happen. Help your people communicate more effectively in this season and as you move forward.

- **FOCUS**

  Clarify the win. Help your team define what the win is in their area of the organization. From a big picture point of view, we want to understand what the "mission win" is. What is the overall goal that your church is looking to achieve in this season? How do we know that we are taking steps forward, and not losing ground? Then, at a micro-level, how do we define ideal work habits? How do we know if people are succeeding in their areas? What new numbers and metrics can they look at to understand if what they're doing is working? How can we help them push back against distraction if we don't clearly articulate what the win looks like for them?

## DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT TO DIVE EVEN DEEPER INTO IN-PERSON, REMOTE, & HYBRID WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

The full report includes lots more information. This post provided an overview but if you download the study, you'll find our in-depth review on various areas, areas that we didn't touch on here. These areas include:

- Learnings around how people are collaborating within their teams. You'll get a deeper sense of what collaboration is looking like within the local church today.

- A look at what tools church leaders are using to connect and collaborate.

- What aspects of your church's "work culture" is winning? Where do we need to be improving? In this part of the study, we look at aspects that are reportedly working for church leaders in their pursuit to create healthy working environments. We also look at areas that seem to be detracting and distracting ideal work environments.

- You'll understand church leaders' concerns and what they will miss if they are to work remotely. In this part of the study, we dive into the potential pains of working towards a more remote work environment. This information could help you craft your communication plans if you're looking to increase how much you and your teamwork remotely in the coming weeks and months.

You'll get an opportunity to look at how we conducted the study, as well as the breakdown of the types of churches that we selected. The best part is that this study is completely free! All you need to do is enter your email address. Using the link below, we'd love for you to share this with other church leaders. Feel free to pass it on to others who may see this as a helpful tool for them as they lead!

Plus the full report also includes expert commentary from leaders who offer their perspectives and takeaways on the research. Even more helpful insights to guide your team as we navigate this season!

- Kenny Jahng - Chief Innovation Officer at Big Click Syndicate & Church Communications
- Kadi Cole - Best Selling Author, Speaker, Consultant
- Tim Stevens - Executive Pastor at Willow Creek Church
- Christine Kreisher - CEO at Irresistible Teams plus Author, Speaker & Coach
- David Fletcher - The Dean of XPs, XPastor.com

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